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ABSTRACT

In 1993 Lake Agassiz School in North Dakota received a Knight Foundation grant so teachers and students could participate in a program to learn how to create an opera. The program instructed teachers on how students could maximize their understanding about producing an opera. The school formed a partnership with the Metropolitan Opera Guild of New York City (New York). The Opera Guild advised the school about the essential tools needed to put on their own opera. This program not only incorporated the arts into the school, but also allowed students to learn teamwork and responsibility. First, the sixth graders brainstormed among themselves on a theme for their opera, then they decided on an opera company name, and finally the students identified the necessary jobs for the opera company. Each student was assigned a specific job as actor, director, producer, set designer, electrician, or carpenter. They were encouraged to work as a team. Students were allowed to choose what job they felt fit their qualifications. In the end, students noted they felt the program was an enjoyable and rewarding learning experience. The program was successful enough to continue for the following school year. A schematic chart is provided describing each job and how it was incorporated into the classroom enviroment. (JAG)

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CREATING ORIGINAL OPERA at Lake Agassiz Elementary School

By Connie Sherwood
Delphine Gregoire
Diane Iverson
Lake Agassiz Elementary School
Grand Forks, ND

Background

Lake Agassiz School in Grand Forks, North Dakota, was the recipient of a Knight Foundation grant in 1993. With this grant teachers at the school studied curriculum integration, portfolio assessment, and multiple intelligences extensively. The sixth grade teachers had a particular interest in integrating the arts into the curriculum, and a portion of the grant money provided them and the music teacher the opportunity to experience the *Creating Original Opera* program, sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera Guild in New York City. This program provides teachers from participating schools with teacher training workshops and an integrated arts curriculum through which children write, compose, and produce a thirty minute opera.

The school, through the principal, the music teacher, and a sixth grade teacher, applied to the Metropolitan Opera Guild in the spring of 1993. They attended the first of three summer teacher training workshops in June of 1993 at Cleveland, Ohio. During the summer of 1994 they attended a second workshop in New York City, and at the same time the other sixth grade teacher attended the first of the workshop series. Upon being accepted in the program, a partnership is formed between the Metropolitan Opera Guild and the participating school. At the building level, a partnership is built between classroom teachers and the music specialist. It is this partnership that is the key to integrating arts into the classroom.

Creating the Opera at Lake Agassiz

The *Creating Original Opera* curriculum (1989/1992) states that

> the key words in the approach are "process" and "original." By taking the students through the process of creating something themselves, their mental and physical capabilities are fully challenged. Opera is used as a vehicle to find out what is important to young people, what affects them emotionally and what excites them. By forming their own company, not only do they take on the adult roles of their professional counterparts, but they come to realize the importance of teamwork and their own responsibility in the learning process. (p. ii)

Lake Agassiz's first opera, entitled "Peace Once Again ... Sweetwater Gone Sour," was created by fifty-two sixth grade students over the course of the 1993-1994 school year. The two sixth grades began the process of creating the opera by brainstorming themes that would be meaningful to them. Working in small and whole groups, the students decided

on a theme by looking for common threads that linked their ideas together. This process, remarkably, brought the children from general ideas such as hockey, school, and pets, to a theme of "jealousy in family relationships."

The next step in the process was to come up with a thesis statement that would redefine the theme. In this way the entire group provided the writers with the intent of their theme. The thesis statement for "Peace Once Again ..." became "Jealousy motivates us to learn about ourselves."

Once the theme and thesis were agreed upon, characters were developed. This process began with a list of adjectives brainstormed by the whole group. These were adjectives that described a person internally, not physically. In the beginning of the process the characters were given the names A,B,C,D,E,F, and G. At this point in the process the characters were nameless and genderless. Five adjectives were assigned to each character. A ratio of three positive and two negative characteristics were used to keep the characters from becoming one dimensional. After each character had five characteristics, the students decided on a *need* for each character. For example, if a character was sneaky, calm, suspicious, caring, and kind, he or she may need friendship in order to bring some of these characteristics to the surface. When all the characteristics and needs were determined, the students examined the relationships between characters. They decided whether each pair of characters would have a positive or a negative relationship based on their needs and characteristics. The two characters determined to have the strongest conflict were then placed into a conflict statement that read, "_____ is in conflict with _____ over _____, affecting _____."

The theme, thesis, characters, and conflict statement became the starting point from which the writers began the opera writing process. In this way the entire group provided the writers with their intent and meaning for the opera. This whole group process nurtured shared ownership of the opera, and statements from children, such as "I have never had to think this hard for this long!" were not uncommon during this discussion process.

The process connected with other classroom activities as well. Within literature units in the classroom, students are asked to identify theme, thesis, characters and their characteristics, and the conflicts that exist between characters. In this way the opera process and whole language story structure were paralleled in the reading / writing / creating processes. Students learned to read critically for author's intent. They saw new depth in the characters within the books and in how the author developed their characters.

The next step in the process was determining a company name. Students brainstormed and voted on a name for the company. The group was named and became known as LAOO94 or Lake Agassiz Opera of '94.

After the company name was established, the process of applying for jobs began. The jobs included: writer, composer, performer, costume designer, make-up artist, carpenter, electrician, public relations person, stage manager, assistant stage manager, and production manager. Students were provided with job descriptions, and each applied for three jobs. The written applications required students to think about some aspects of the job and then write each application in a way that indicated their personal interests and qualifications as they related to each job.

Some of the jobs were one-person jobs, such as production manager, stage manager, and assistant stage manager. Most jobs, though, required students to work in cooperative groups.

Applications were read, and each student was assigned to a job. Each student and his or her parents then signed a contract agreeing to do the assigned job to the best of the student's ability. From this point on, the production manager was in charge of scheduling and running weekly company meetings. Responsibility was gently shifted from the teachers to the students.

Within the classroom, students worked on persuasive writing. They read biographies and determined how the person of their choice achieved what he or she did in life. Career options were discussed within the classrooms.

Next, the writers, composers, and public relations groups began to meet. The writers began by writing a scenario for the opera and naming the characters. All the characters had to be child characters within a familiar setting. The writers thus wrote from a perspective and context that they had experienced. They wrote a narrative from which they developed character dialogue.

The composers began constructing melodic motifs based on the characters' personalities. They decided which style of music would enhance and draw out the features of the characters. They then extended these motifs to accompany the lyrics provided by the writers.

The public relations group developed a logo that would best define the opera company and help to sell the product. They wrote press releases, developed posters, contacted and greeted the media, developed and organized fund-raising activities, and wrote the program. During the performances, they became ushers and made a schedule for the audience.

As the script developed, other groups were added as needed. The electricians studied the stage and how it was wired. They drew diagrams and determined how much power was available to run the lighting equipment. They then built lights and strung wire on the stage. During the performance they executed the light cues.

All students in the sixth grade studied electricity and magnetism as a regular unit in their classrooms.

Electricians then used what they learned in an authentic hands-on experience by performing their opera jobs.

The set designers measured the stage and then built a model of the set to scale. They made a blueprint of the stage which was then given to the carpenters. The carpenters built the set according to the specifications of the set designers. The set designers and carpenters determined how they could build the set within a limited budget. (This required a great deal of resourcefulness on the part of the children and their teachers!)

Costumers and make-up groups studied the script to determine which clothes and make-up would best represent each character. The make-up artists practiced their techniques on each other before they began with the performers.

The stage manager ran lines with performers and practiced light cues with the electricians. The assistant stage manager gathered all the necessary props.

Performers awaited the script so that they could develop their individual characters. They developed backgrounds for each of their characters in an attempt to better understand the particular characters they portrayed. They tried to determine the intent of the writers and composers for their particular characters.

Each of these groups worked with an adult advisor, but the jobs were actually done

by the students. The goal of the teachers was to back away from the production so that the company was able to run on its own, with no adult intervention. Weekly company meetings kept all of the groups informed of the opera's progress. Representatives from each of the groups went out into the community to speak with various organizations. LAOO94 spoke to the School Board, the Rotary Club, and several classrooms across the city. This public speaking opportunity helped to raise funds for the opera while building each child's self-confidence.

The diagram on page 6 illustrates how the opera complemented the existing sixth grade curriculum. The curricular theme of "Changes" was chosen by the teachers in an attempt to look at personal and physical change in a global sense. The boxes represent the opera concepts, and the circles represent concepts taught in the existing sixth grade curriculum.

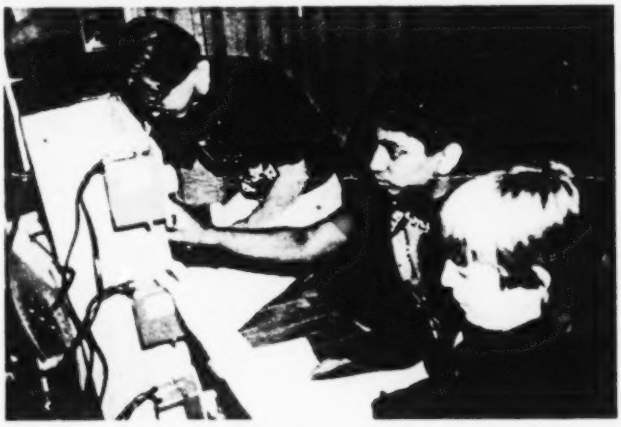
The Results

The students involved in the Lake Agassiz Opera of 1994 found the experience to be very rewarding. They each had the opportunity to choose a job through which they could express themselves through their individual learning styles. There was never a sense that one job was more important than another. Every child found an identity that he or she might not have had before the project. The opera put the principles of cooperation and active learning into a truly authentic experience.

The *Creating Original Opera* program is now in its second year at Lake Agassiz School. The second group of children came in with many of their own unique ideas, and the 1994-95 opera promises to be as different and challenging as the first.

References

Creating Original Opera. (1989/1992). New York: Metropolitan Opera Guild.



We apologize for the lateness of this issue. The May issue will be coming out within the next two weeks.

About the Authors

All three authors are teachers at Lake Agassiz School in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Connie Sherwood is the music teacher; Delphine Gregoire and Diane Iverson are sixth grade teachers. Connie and Diane attended the *Creating Original Opera* program in 1993 and 1994, and Delphine attended in 1994.

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CHANGES

Math: Opera
-Set construction
-Scale drawings
-Measurement
-Geometry
-Estimation
-Problem Solving (Watts to Amps, etc.)
-Finance Unit

Technology:
Opera/Classroom
-Sound system
-Lighting
-Computers
-Musical Keyboard

Reading: Opera
-Development of theme and thesis for opera and identified them in classroom novels.
-Dialogue
-Mood (Electricians set colors/lighting to create a mood.
-Characterization (Writers, make-up and performers studied characters in the script.

Math: Classroom
-Addition/Subtraction
-Multiplication/Division
-Measurement
-Geometry
-Estimation

Reading: Classroom
"Becoming" Unit - We looked at the changes in the lives of characters. (Personal Growth)

Realistic Fiction
-Where the Red Fern Grows - Lottery Rose
(Listed characters from book and the characteristics of each character.)

Journal Writing
-Cause and Effect
-Author's Style
-Vocabulary development through dialogue

Social Studies: Opera
-Ancient cultures and their contributions to theater.
-Greek
-Roman
-Renaissance

Social Studies: Classroom
-Hands on Geography
-Maps
-Ancient History
-Renaissance

Library Skills
-Biographies (Researched famous people and looked for change or changes in their lives that allowed them to succeed in their chosen field.)

Science: Opera
-Building lights/ Dimmer board
Test on amps/watts/ ohms/volts

Science: Classroom
-Made electromagnets
-Static/Current Electricity
-Circuits/Opened/Closed
-Calculate resistance
-Ohm's Law
-Insulators/Conductors
-Magnets
-Compasses

Art: Opera
-Design logo
-Window Displays
-Collages
-Bulletin Boards

Art: Classroom
-Artist in Residence
-Classroom crafts and projects

Physical Education: Opera
-Team building
-Movement

Physical Education: Classroom
-Health/Fitness
-Physical Changes
-Sportsmanship
-Game skills

Music: Opera
-Create melodic themes from characters
-Adapting melody to lyrics resulting in a song
-Diction for performance

Music: Classroom
-Rhythmic and melodic changes
-Song writing unit that involves writing a melody and adding chords to produce a song.
-Voice

Writing: Opera
-Jealousy stories
-Letter writing (P.R.)
-Public speaking (Preparation through writing)
-Application writing/Persuasive writing
-Biographies/Autobiographies
-Proof reading
-Capitalization/Punctuation -Word usage
-Parts of speech
-Characterization/Character Development
-Writing Narratives/ Dialogue/ Personal
-Drafting and Revision

Public Speaking: Opera
-The students gave oral presentations at the rotary Club, School Board, Artwise and Elementary Schools. They wrote their presentations.

Writing: Classroom
-Biographies/Autobiographies
-Characters/Character Development
-Grammar through process writing
-Narrative/dialogue
-Drafting/Revision
-Proofed letters, envelopes to be sent out.

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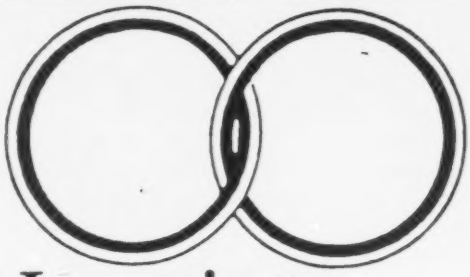

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